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1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Shay, Anthony. "The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia," *Dance Research Journal* 38, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter, 2006), pp. 137-162.

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The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia

Anthony Shay

That night 'Abdi Jan's troupe had been called so that the harem occupants could watch the show. Of course, you remember 'Abdi well. Let me, nonetheless, give you a description of his looks. He was a lad of about twelve or thirteen, with large black eyes, languid and incredibly beautiful and attractive. His face was tanned and good-looking, his lips crimson, and his hair black and thick. Renowned throughout the town, the boy had a thousand adoring lovers. Being a dancer, however, he was unworthy of being anyone's beloved. (Taj Al-Sultana 1993, 163)

Within this quotation the reader may find a rich description of historical and even contemporary Middle Eastern attitudes toward dance and male dancers in particular, penned from a native point of view.¹ In this article I address those attitudes, but more importantly challenge several cherished, long-held assumptions and theoretical stances expressed by native elites and Westerners interested in Middle Eastern dance and dancers. First, I challenge the romantic views that many gay men hold that the presence of male dancers and the sexual interest expressed toward them by Middle Eastern men somehow constitutes evidence for an environment accepting of homosexuality and a utopian gay paradise, where the possibility of unbridled sexual congress with handsome, passionately out-of-control Arabs, Persians, and Turks exists. Thus, they crucially confuse gay or homosexual identity with homosexual activity or behavior. Because of this confusion, I use an important aspect of queer theory that counters "the monolithic alternative of liberationist gay politics" (Bleys 1995, 7) to look at the phenomenon of professional male dancers in a somewhat grittier, more realistic light. In particular, I refer to Stephen O. Murray's groundbreaking article, "The Will Not to Know" (1997, 14–54), which es-

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tablishes a valuable lens through which to view how the vast majority of Middle Eastern individuals regard homosexual acts.

Second, I address the attitude that solo improvised dance of which *raqs sharqi*, *çiftetelli*/belly dance in Egypt and Turkey is the best known example, and other forms of Middle Eastern solo improvised dance in the Iranian world and Central Asia constitute an exclusively, or even primarily, female form of cultural expression.² Rather, I attempt to recuperate solo improvised dance as a genre that is danced by everyone in a variety of performances, amateur and professional, by boys and girls, women and men.

Third, I challenge the oft-expressed viewpoint that male dancers were imitating or parodying women. This latter notion is proffered by some Middle Eastern and Western writers and observers who either wish to explain away and distance themselves from a topic that embarrasses them or one that they imperfectly understand because of its reputed connection with homosexuality. The result is that most reprehensible and fundamental scholarly error of those writing on historical topics: analyzing historical values through a contemporary lens and projecting them backward on other times and ethnocentrically on other places.

The presence of male dancers, professional and nonprofessional, in public and private space requires a (re)evaluation of the meaning of these male bodies: who they were, what they did, how they presented themselves, what they wore, who their audiences were, and what the prevailing attitudes toward them were. One of the problems encountered in addressing this topic is the projection of contemporary Western notions of proper masculine and feminine behavior onto the historical past, as well as onto non-Western societies, by popular and scholarly writers (see, for example, Hanna 1988, 57–59 and 62–64; Jonas 1992, 113–15).

As a methodology, I rely on my own experiences as a performer, choreographer, researcher, traveler, and observer of Middle Eastern and Central Asian dance over the past fifty years as well as interviews with dancers and observers and analysis of scholarly works by such writers as Metin And, the dean of Turkish dance studies, more recent scholarship coming from Iran through such music historians as Sassan Fatemi and Hassan Mashhun, and the large but highly fragmented observations tucked away, unindexed, in numerous memoirs and books written by European travelers over the past four centuries. I also discuss Persian and Arabic literary sources and iconographic evidence in the form of miniature paintings, historical photographs, and film recordings of actual dance performances in Egypt, Morocco, and Afghanistan. These require a close analytical reading. The historical records left by European travelers frequently display overt hostility to Muslim societies and cultural expression, thus the analyst must navigate the shoals of their prejudice to mine the valuable information found in their reports. (Re)viewing of films, mostly from the 1970s, became especially crucial in this study because those who filmed the sequences, even trained anthropologists like Louis Dupree, frequently responded inappropriately or with a Western bias when faced with evidence of homosexuality or effeminacy in an alien society, visual evidence that a contemporary well-trained dance historian might view very differently.

To illustrate the points I wish to make in this article, I have selected a wide geographical zone, including Cairo, Egypt; Istanbul, Turkey; Tehran and Isfahan, Iran; and

Bukhara, Heart, and Samarqand in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and a deep historical period, the late fifteenth century to the present, because of the similarities and contrasts that exist in both time and place, and the fairly consistent existence of the category of the male dancer. Abundant materials documenting this phenomenon are available, both from native sources and European travelers, during this period and in these sites.

The greatest change in attitudes toward and patronage of these dancers came through Russian, English, and French colonial invaders in the late nineteenth century who regarded male dancers and their scandalous performances with ill-disguised repugnance and disdain, and through enforced educational systems and efforts by various Christian church organizations, all bent on the so-called “civilizing mission.” The colonial powers successfully, at least among certain influential elements of the elite population, inculcated European notions of sexual prudery to the subject peoples that ultimately resulted in the eradication of patronage for these dancers beginning after World War I. However, male dancers existed in Afghanistan until the Russian invasion, and perhaps after,³ and in rural Turkey and Iran even after the Islamic Revolution, and continue in some Iranian and Arab diaspora communities.

Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s in Egypt (Shay 2002) and Uzbekistan (Doi 2002), and the 1970s in Iran (personal observation 1976), modern postcolonial choreographers directing national state folk dance ensembles attempted to further eradicate traces of this male choreographic tradition by creating “new” styles of dance, suitable to the urban, Westernized male and their sensitive elite audiences. Mahmoud Reda in Egypt, various individuals in Uzbekistan, and Robert de Warren in Iran created these new, very awkward, hypermasculine movement styles out of whole cloth. As an example, I will detail Reda’s creations later in the article.

In addition, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, several male dancers, functioning in the Iranian and Arab diaspora communities as dancers in wedding parties, nightclubs, television, and concert appearances, continued to perform and retain a following, even as some members of the diaspora communities, as a reflection of postcolonial attitudes, find them an embarrassment. Thus, we can see that the phenomenon of the male dancer is still present. While the older style of dancer continues to ply his trade, the phenomenon of the postcolonial male dancer points to the sharp contrasts between the two modes of performance, and the underlying changes in attitudes toward sexuality and gender that underpin them.

Male dancers have been attested in the historical records of the Middle East prior to Islam. Bagoas was a male eunuch/concubine who was famous for his dancing skills. First he was a concubine of the last Achaemenian king, Darius III, and, upon the king’s defeat, Bagoas passed as war booty into the possession of Alexander the Great, with whom he remained until Alexander’s untimely death in 323 BC.⁴ Statues, miniatures, photographs, and other abundant iconic evidence demonstrate that the male dancer was a fixture of Middle Eastern society both in urban centers (see, for example, And 1959, 26, 29, 36; 1976, figures 17, 32–36, 60, 64, 74, 82, 83, 90; Naumkin 1993, jacket cover; Rezvani plates XIV – XVI) and as itinerant performers in the countryside (see *Dances of Egypt*; *Afghan Village*; Michaud 1980, 70; Mortensen 1993, 366–367). Male dancers

began to disappear after World War I in some cities such as Cairo and Bukhara where they were forced out due to the Victorian-era prudery and the severe disapproval of the Russian and English colonial authorities who ruled in those cities and the postcolonial elites who had absorbed their western moral values. Male dancers were commonplace in our lifetime in rural Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan, among other locations, and during the holidays around the Iranian New Year they even ventured into the cities. I observed them in Iran in the 1950s and 1970s and Afghanistan in the 1970s. They were also observed and discussed at some length by John Baily in his study of the professional musicians of Herat, Afghanistan (1988).

Homosexuality and the Male Dancer

Like their female counterparts, professional male dancers were widely and correctly perceived as sexually available (Mathee 2000, 139; Najmabadi 2005). This, of course, brings up the issue of homosexuality. Two schools of theory—"essentialist" and "social constructionist"—have continued to occupy much space in lesbian and gay scholarly history writing; neither of these schools of thought constitutes a useful theoretical framework for analyzing sexuality, specifically the social/sexual named category of the male dancer in the Islamic Middle East and Central Asia.

The essentialist viewpoint, held by some scholars and widely held by the general public in the West, is that homosexuals, or the more modern categories of gay men and lesbians, have existed in all times and places. This school of thought has been particularly supported by John Boswell in his widely read and influential book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (1980), but later he somewhat altered his theoretical stance (1989, 17–36).

The basic premise of constructionist scholars is: homosexuality is always, as with all gendered constructs, situationally constituted in time and place. "It is now believed that sexuality is thoroughly defined by culture, that is: by people's symbolic structuring of desire" (Bleys 1995, 6). The main premise of this stance is that while homosexual acts have occurred in many historical times and places, homosexual identity is a recent social construction. Scholars of this school argue for different times and places in the West for this identity formation from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in Holland, and the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century in centers like London (Weeks 1991, 6; 86–99).

In this article I step outside essentialist and constructionist categories, which, while permitting analyses of historical Western societies, fail to capture the way in which male dancers are viewed throughout the Middle East and Central Asia because they are regarded only in part as homosexuals and they constitute a separate social/sexual category of person. Rather, I suggest that male dancers occupy a social category that consists of a bundle of attributes, of which passive homosexual behavior and sexual availability constitute only two of the elements of that characterization. The binary of active hypermasculine/passive feminized also constitutes an anachronism. Historian Afsaneh

Najmabadi observes: “Some of the currently accepted ‘typologies’ of male homosexuality in Islamicate cultures assume the hypermasculinity of ‘active’ and the femininity of ‘passive’ males involved in homosexual practices. This typology is itself a consequence of the modernist heterosexualization of love” (2005, 59). Other characterizations of the male dancer included conflicting societal attributions: undependability, fickleness, frivolity, youthfulness, a member of the demimonde, social outcast, while at the same time remaining an object of desire and ambiguity. His movements and dances were assiduously copied by women in the harem who viewed their performances at functions they were permitted to view from the harem, as noted in the opening citation. Poets in the classical period created odes celebrating them and their beauty and charms (And 1959, 30; Mashhun 2001, 242), several of them had many male followers and admirers of their performances, and soldiers fought over their favors. It is through the poetry and some Persian language musical treatises, beginning in the 1490s, that we chiefly know the names of some of these dancers and the way in which they were viewed within their culture and historical period.⁵

Indeed, it is important to note that these named categories constitute both historical and contemporary reactions. For example, in Egypt the term “khawal” that indicated a male dancer in the nineteenth century is used today as one of the terms for an individual who takes the passive role in a homosexual act. In Iran the term “raqas-bazi” (acting the [male] dancer) is used to warn children to act properly, and not in an ill-bred and disreputable fashion. Under the aegis of the Pahlavi government, the word “raqsandeh” was created to mean either a male or female dancer. Unlike the old terms, “raqas” (male dancer) and “raqaseh” (female dancer), raqsandeh is socially neutral. Significantly, these gendered Arabic loan words are among the only ones used in everyday contemporary and historical Persian.

As in the West, attitudes toward homosexuality in the Middle East, whether as an identity or a set of activities and behaviors, are dynamic and contingent. In the Middle East, particularly among Westernized elites, attitudes are heavily influenced by historical colonialist Western attitudes and, more recently, by Islamist moral purity movements. “The mere fact that there are scarce mentions of homosexuality in contemporary literature, when compared with classical poetry or (medieval) *adab* literature, could be interpreted as an indication of huge transformations in Arab men’s relations with their bodies and desires” (Lagrange 2000, 120). I suggest that this change in attitudes and relations stems from the successful colonial imposition of western sexual values and mores. “European expressions of discomfort or disgust on encountering prostitution or homosexual practices in Egypt are themselves important. They make manifest the steady pressure, the impetus and exhortation to sexual conformity, which was one aspect of the growing presence and influence of Europeans, and the civilizing process in Egypt” (Dunne 1996, 26). More important, as Najmabadi brilliantly points out, native elites also had agency and frequently avidly embraced European values and attitudes. They did this to achieve modernity and, in their eyes, to gain social, economic, political, and military parity with Europeans. This meant that same-sex relations became equated with backwardness (2005, chapter 2). Nevertheless, changing attitudes toward sexuality did not occur rapidly. Najmabadi observes:

"This profound heterosexualization of sensibilities was never fully 'accomplished' at the level of either gender of sexuality. . . . It took a century for many of these sensibilities to change" (2005, 55).

It is important to stress that homosexual acts are condemned by Islamic law, as they are in Christianity, and Muslim clerics frequently fulminated against them. This fulmination often centered on the Sufi practice of gazing at beautiful youths (*shahed-bazi*), considered to be witnesses to God's highest creations of beauty, and reflected in mystical poetry, during their meditations and ceremonies, in which the older men gazed upon and contemplated the wonder of young male faces as a representation of the beauty of God's creation. Persian literature scholar Sirus Shamisa glosses "*shahed-bazi*" as "sodomy" with young males (2002, last page, bibliographic information reverse of title page). The Islamic Republic banned this work and most of the copies were seized and destroyed. It was societal attitudes toward sexuality in general that varied between Muslim and Christian societies (see Mernissi 1975).

In the West, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, "homosexual" is considered an identity, and "gay" and "lesbian" are considered political acts of self-identification. An individual harboring homosexual desires, even if they do not participate in homosexual activity, can be regarded as homosexual, or gay and lesbian if they are self-identified. In other parts of the world men, particularly those in active sex roles, are often not considered as homosexual, either by themselves or society at large, which conflates issues of power and domination as well as sexuality. In such societies, variations of bisexual behavior often constitute normative behavior. This diverges strongly from Western viewpoints in which all men who participate in homosexual acts are considered homosexual. Thus, the category of "homosexual" or "gay" is a dynamic, culturally constituted identity.

In the Middle East (and other parts of the world like Latin America) homosexuality, and indeed sex in general, can be avidly discussed among close-knit, generally small, same-age, same-sex groups of friends when they are young. Young men in Iran and Turkey, for example, frequently call each other by derogative terms for homosexuals as a joke. "The Iranian preoccupation with anal sex amounted to an obsession. Jokes and insults abounded, and the expressed desire of one male to get into his friend's pants was frequently taken as a good-natured jest" (Zarit 1991, 36).

Sex in all of its forms constitutes a constant staple of humor in performances of the traditional theater (see Lansdell 1887 [1978], 304–05; Shay 1999, 152–56). However, sex is not a topic that is discussed in an open way, as it is in the West where open discussion of sexual experiences and feelings occurs in a range of settings, from serious psychological works to popular culture media such as television talk shows. Rather, in the Middle East, homosexuality was tolerated precisely because it was not discussed. To be openly accused of passive homosexuality brings about the most shameful opprobrium in Middle Eastern societies because one is feminized and therefore dishonored; thus, every attempt is made to keep silent regarding homosexual activity. Stephen O. Murray discusses this phenomenon of silence in detail in his important essay, "The Will Not to Know" (1997, 14–54).⁶

Western (Christian) perceptions of the Islamic Middle East as a hotbed of homosexual

activity allowed Europeans to position themselves as culturally and morally superior to “debauched and degenerate” Middle Easterners in the construction of the Orientalist discourse that was formed from the years that Islam posed a threat to European hegemony, beginning with the Crusades, right up to modern times (see Bleys 1995, 20–25). From this position, European travelers frequently commented on Middle Eastern men in the most negative of terms and invariably detailed homosexual activities that they witnessed or, more often heard through rumors, in their memoirs, books, and other writings. Many of them described, with a delighted and delicious frisson, the professional male dancers, their dances, and their enthusiastic male audiences, which had become a trope of degenerate Middle Eastern homosexuality. Many educated Middle Easterners, familiar with western attitudes of disapproval, are sensitive to the discussion of dancing boys and male dancers. Turkish dance historian Metin And remarks,

Turkish sources offer little information with regard to dancing boys and dancing girls. This is because dancing was regarded by many writers of the past as an improper and wicked sport, especially when indulged in by professional women and boys. On the other hand, foreign travellers have given much attention to this topic in their books and, although they emphasize the slack morality and obscene character of the dancing, they cannot hide from their descriptions the breathless interest they took in these performances. (1959, 24)

A small sampling of comments of European travelers will convey the heavy burden of ethnocentric disapproval that attached to their performances. A French artist accompanying Napoleon stated, “The performers, all of them of the male sex, presented, in the most indecent way, scenes which love has reserved for the two sexes in the silent mystery of the night” (quoted in Berger 1961, 30–31). Eugene Schuyler observed that “here boys and youths specially trained take the place of the dancing-girls of other countries. The moral tone of the society of Central Asia is scarcely improved by the change” (1876 [1966], 70). He found the dances, “were by no means indecent, though they were often very lascivious” (72).

By contrast, many of the Orientalist scholars attempting to glorify Eastern cultures maintained a strict silence regarding homosexuality, which precluded any scholarly discussion of male dancers: “The modern reader is puzzled by the disparity between the orthodox sentiments of religious writings or the refined passion of the mystical poems on the one hand, and the lustful pornographic pieces on sodomy and seduction of boys on the other (Southgate 1984, 415). Many willfully refused to translate poetry with homoerotic references or changed the sex of the beloved to female. Iranian history scholar Minoo Southgate observes: “English translators even in the tamer episodes of the *Gulistan* turn boys into girls and change anecdotes about pederasty into tales of heterosexual love” (1984, 415). Historian Louis Crompton says of the well-known scholar of Persian literature, A. J. Arberry: “The cautious Briton seems to have eschewed poems whose sexual details were explicit, but his book nevertheless reveals an astonishingly broad range of homoerotic poems” (1997, 154). To this day, the majority of both the originals and the translations of the raunchy poetry of the bawdy bard, Obeid-e Zakani (d. 1370) either

bowdlerize or omit the “naughty” words with coy little dashes to indicate the lacunae that the knowledgeable reader may furnish by inference (see Sprachman 1995, and as an example, Ashtiani 1995). As Annemarie Schimmel, a venerable scholar of Sufism, observed: “The object [of the poem] can be the beautiful beloved, preferably a fourteen-year-old boy who is as cruel as he is charming. . . . [I]n the first verse [of Hafiz’ poem] we certainly do not find the ‘charming maid of Shiraz’” (1992, 282).

In their excellent collection, *Islamic Homosexualities*, editors Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (1997) have quite correctly characterized Middle Eastern male-male sexual behaviors in the plural.⁷ The first important point is that while an ideal of older men as the dominant participants and young boys and youths as passive partners in homoerotic contexts was widely celebrated in Persian, Arabic, and Turkish poetry and classical *adab* literature through the depiction of the ideal beloved as a beautiful youth, the reality was, and is, in fact, much more varied (see Crompton 1997, 142–47; Hillmann 1990, 78; Murray 1997, 14–54 and 132–41; Wafer 1997, 107–31).⁸ “In Islamic Persia, as elsewhere, mystic writers like Rumi produced a rhetoric in which sexual union between two males was a metaphor for ecstatic union with God” (Murray and Roscoe 1997, 309).

However, the careful scholar must avoid essentialism: same-age partners and partners exchanging sex roles was, and is, much more widespread than the ideal depicting rigid categories would suggest. Several of these variations are made explicit in the limited amount of natively created erotic literature from the medieval period and illustrations that have been published (see Murray and Roscoe; Rawson; Surieu; Wright and Rawson). The professional male dancer, in many ways, was, and is, an embodiment of the Persian, Arabic, and Turkish poetic ideal and these dancers were referred to as “boys” (see Hillmann 1990, 77–84 and Southgate 1984, 428–31). Persian historian, Ehsan Yar-Shater notes:

As a rule, the beloved is not a woman, but a young man. In the early centuries of Islam, the raids into Central Asia produced many young slaves. Slaves were also bought or received as gifts. They were made to serve as pages . . . or as soldiers and body-guards. Young men, slaves or not, also, served wine at banquets and receptions, and the more gifted among them could play music and maintain a cultivated conversation. It was love toward young pages, soldiers, or novices in trades and professions which was the subject of lyrical introductions to panegyrics from the beginning of Persian poetry, and of the *ghazal*. (1986, 973–974)

In fact, among the many words for male dancers, “*bacheh*,” the term used in parts of Central Asia means “child” (either male or female), and “*köçek*,” one of the terms used in Turkey, means “little” and would seem to indicate that the majority of male dancers were young and began their careers at an early age. However, they often danced much later than the literature indicates, some into old age. Like Western actors, dancers with attractive and vivacious personalities were able to transcend the physical beauty that carried them through their youth and became popular entertainers due to their wit and personality (personal observation). This is still true of both male and female performers in the Iranian community of Southern California as well as the Middle East and Central

Asia. One can see their performances in the Iranian diasporan television, wedding parties, and nightclubs (personal observation). Thus, reality departs from the ideal.

Who Were These Dancers?

Historically, most professional dancers came from the very lowest layers of society. Clifford Bosworth notes that entertainers, including dancers, were included among the criminal classes in Arab descriptions of the medieval underworld (1976, 1). Such a despised occupation was avoided by all but the most desperate. Ethnically they were often Gypsies, or Jewish or Christian minority children, Greeks and Armenians in Turkey and Egypt (And 1959, 28–30), and Armenians, Georgians, and Jews in Iran (Mashhun 2001, 292; Matthee 2000, 139). Elsewhere, in Central Asia and Afghanistan, they were Muslims, occasionally Jews. As Berger describes for their female counterparts in Egypt, “it is still an avenue to fame and material success for a few girls of poor families who would otherwise wind up as the wives of underpaid factory or farm laborers or minor clerks and raise five or six children for them in dirt, poverty and ill health” (1961, 36). Many, if not most, of them were born into the tradition and belonged to families of entertainers, constituting almost a caste since intermarriage with them was repugnant to most members of society. Others came from poverty-stricken backgrounds or were orphans.

We even know some of their names. Medjid Rezvani describes a well-known dancer named Hossein-Djan (1962, 210). Djamila Henni-Chebra mentions the famous nineteenth-century Cairene dancer, Hassan el-Bilbeissi (1996, 34) for whom Gustave Flaubert had ambiguous sexual longings. In Turkey, Metin And notes that many dancers had what we would today call stage names, among them Altintop (Golden Ball), Kanarya (Canary), Tazefidan (Young Sapling), Tilki (Fox), and Kivicik (Curly). He observes that a famous Turkish poet, Enderunlu Fazil Vehbi in his *Daftari Ashk* (Notebook of Love) penned 170 couplets praising the skill and beauty of a celebrated dancing boy, Cingene Ismail (1959, 30). During the late Timurid period (1490s), several Persian language poets rhapsodized over the famous court dancer, Maqsud Ali Ragas (Mashhun 2001, 241).

When they grew older, most male dancers married and had their own children; they would often serve as musicians for the younger performers, and they became the leader of the performing unit, a practice And describes as alive in Turkey in the 1950s (1959, 27). The leader of the troupe was generally the lead instrumentalist and from that position he directed the performances (And 1959, 27; Rezvani 1962, 209). Young dancers were always under the direction of older individuals, sometimes their fathers, but in several cities such as Tehran, Cairo, and Istanbul, they were members of well-organized troupes that plied their trade in specific districts of the city. Schuyler notes that in Bukhara an “entrepreneur takes care of them and always accompanies them. He dresses them for the different dances, wraps them up when they have finished, and looks after them as well as any duenna” (1876 [1966], 71).

Because their sexual activities were often a source of lucrative income, they had no

choice but to participate in those activities, whatever their sexual inclinations may have been. In some areas, such as Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent, castration of dancers used to be common. Writing in 1972, Dupree, who filmed and observed dancing boys in Afghanistan, observed: “Generations ago many dancing boys were eunuchs, but castration is infrequent today” (1976, 16). Although we have no records, what I am suggesting is that these young men, because of such practices, led gritty, difficult, sometimes painful lives and in late twentieth-century parlance would be considered abused children. But such a concept would be an anachronism in the context of the Middle East in the historical periods under discussion.

Underlining my point, European traveler Schuyler describes the lives of the professional male dancers of Bukhara in 1876:

The *batchas* practice their profession from a very early age until sometimes so late as twenty or twenty-five, or . . . until it is impossible to conceal their beards. The life which they have led hardly fits them for independent existence thereafter. So long as they are young and pretty they have their own way in everything; every command is obeyed by their adorers, every purse is at their disposition, and they fall into a life of caprice, extravagance, and dissipation. Rarely do they lay up any money, and more rarely still are they able to profit by it afterwards. Frequently a *batcha* is set up as a keeper of a tea-house by his admirers, where he will always have a good clientele, and sometimes he is started as a small merchant. Occasionally one succeeds, and becomes a prosperous man, though the remembrance of his past life will frequently . . . affix, *batcha*, to his name. I have known one or two men, now rich and respected citizens, who began life in this way. In the old days it was much easier, for a handsome dancer might easily become Kushbegi, or Grand Vizier.⁹ More often a *batcha* takes to smoking opium or drinking *kukhnar*, and soon dies of dissipation. (1876 [1966], 71)

Schuyler’s description referred to the highest level of dancing boys: the less fortunate boys dancing in public places were “under police supervision” (1876 [1966], 71), again connecting them to the gritty underworld.

What Did They Do?

Male dancers, like female dancers, and entertainers in the West, had to be highly talented and capable performers, and generally they were described as handsome or beautiful, a sine qua non for a public performer in the beginning of his career. Of course, they were skilled dancers and performed solo improvised dancing in the stylistic framework of the specific area in which they worked. As And comments, while today “what is left is the *cifetetelli*, improvised dancing” (1959, 24), in the past several names existed for the dances which refer to objects they carried or balanced, items of clothing emphasized during the dance, or characteristic movements (And 1959, 24; Khaleqi 1974, 470–86). What is clear is that dancing, at least until World War I, was much more athletic and

spectacular than the tamer dancing seen in today's cabarets or in the watered down versions performed by state-sponsored folk dance companies such as those found in Egypt, Tunis, and Turkey. Gone are the athletic elements and skills and the bawdy humor that made a few of these historical dancers star performers to their large and admiring audiences.

It is worth stressing that the most highly paid and popular dancers put in long hours of rehearsal, as detailed by And (1959, 26). This was important because the competition to dance in the best homes and palaces was stiff. One dance master placed his young charges in large baskets suspended from the ceiling and whirled them in order to "prevent the dancers' becoming giddy while performing turns" (And 1959, 26). Acrobatic feats and special skills such as balancing heavy candelabra, cups filled with hot tea, swords, or batons also required hours of training.

Many of the movements of these dances were extremely sensual, at least to their audiences, a fact much commented on by Europeans. Moreover, like entertainers in the West, they strove to make their dance performances unique and different for as And (1959, 1976), Rezvani (1962), and Khaleqi (1974)¹⁰ make very clear, the competition between the groups (called *kol* in Turkey, *dasteh-ye motreb* in Iran) was keen. In order to compete, the dancers performed feats of athleticism and dexterity, including somersaults, backflips, handstands, dancing balanced on knives, and writing a patron's name in rice flour on the floor with their foot as they danced. The dancers all played castanets or finger cymbals, wooden spoons, or even smooth stones used as castanets, to accompany the rhythms of their dances. Many of them learned to sing and play musical instruments. They incorporated acting and mime; for example, two dancers might act like a pair of lovers quarrelling and making up (*qabr va ashti*) or a boy wooing a girl. These little playlets provided the opportunity to introduce bawdy sexual references, both in movement and song, in their performances that their audiences often found hilarious. In his description of dancers in the Safavid period in Iran (1500–1722), Beiza'i describes how four dancers had themselves carried into the performance area in boxes, large versions of those used for the dancing puppets that itinerant entertainers (*lo'bat-baz*) manipulated. As each dancer emerged, he (or she) was dressed in the color of his box and did a dance like a puppet (1965, 169). Thus, these performers had a large repertoire of skills and innovation that they brought to their performances.

The movements in the Turkish and Egyptian dancers described by travelers clearly indicate that these dance forms closely approached contemporary belly dance techniques, while those in Iran and Central Asia relied on sensual and erotic mimetic movements, graceful carriage of the arms and hands, articulations of the shoulders, and like And's descriptions of Turkish dancers (1959, 26–31), minute movements of the lips and eyebrows. Performances of male and female professional dancers were almost identical.

The sexual and sensual elements of the performances were often commented on by European travelers who, without either sufficient linguistic or cultural skills, seemed unable to realize that these references in song and movement, more often than not, had a primarily comical aspect and were rarely serious attempts to portray actual lovemak-

ing. The native Iranian theater (*siyah-bazi; ru-howzi*), based on dance movements and performances and full of sexual references, is a satirical comic theater (see Shay 1999, 152–56).

Solo Improvised Dance as a Male and Female Choreographic Form

Solo improvised dance, and especially its most well-known form, belly dance, has been largely staked out by a certain element of the feminist movement in western nations as a vehicle of sexual liberation and feminist expression, concomitantly marginalizing the male presence in the belly dance community. I again stress the idea that this solo improvised dance tradition is neither masculine nor feminine, but a dance genre that is participated in by everyone (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, 22). In one of the earliest, serious writings on belly dance, and after describing other forms of dance in the Arab Middle East, Morroe Berger states: “Finally there is the *danse du ventre*. It has a folk quality, for it is danced by boys and girls, men and women in some Arab villages; there it is sexual but only moderately so. The belly dance of the entertainer is, of course, more passionate and sexual than the folk version” (1961, 17). Having made this one statement concerning the universal participation of males and females in this dance tradition, Berger addresses the topic of belly dance, in an otherwise commendable essay, as if it were performed exclusively by female performers, through the text and accompanying photographs and illustrations. This dance tradition does not have direct links with homosexual activity; most of the men who perform it in social settings lead largely heterosexual lives.

Feminists who have adopted belly dance as an emblem of the female sexual revolution in the 1970s often revel in romanticized descriptions of belly dance as a female form of cultural expression:

My own experience of Egyptian *baladi* goes back some twelve years. The first time I saw it, it struck me as something rare and magical. I thought then, and still think, that it is the most eloquent of female dances, with its haunting lyricism, its fire, its endlessly shifting kaleidoscope of sensual movement. (Buonaventura 1989, 10)

Following such statements and adhering to orientalist attitudes that male bodies make only certain types of movements in some universal crosscultural masculine matrix, for example not articulating shoulders or torsos, Fifi Abdo, one of the leading belly dancers in Egypt, declared: “It’s impossible for a man to dance real belly dancing. The phrase itself describes the part from the hips to the waist and a man lacks the energy that a woman has” (*New York Times*, May 6, 2000, F2). Abdo’s inaccurate statement underscores Berger’s assessment of belly dancers in Egypt: “Whatever skills and talents these dancers might have, dance history is not one of them” (Berger 1966, 48). I will extend Berger’s assessment to include Abdo’s powers of observation regarding the contemporary dance scene as well.

Several writers that purport to be writing in a scholarly or semi-scholarly vein make irresponsible and unsupported statements such as the following:

There is no masculine equivalent to the dance that Muslim women practice among themselves. In the countryside, following traditions that may be older than Islam itself, men in many Muslim countries take part in dances that emphasize athletic prowess and often employ warlike props such as swords, daggers, and rifles. But in the cities, dance for Muslim men is more of a spectator sport. . . . Despite the fact that this dance is indissolubly associated with women, some male spectators will get up and dance along briefly with the entertainers. These men undulate their shoulders and hips in what looks like a self-mocking parody of traditional gender roles, combined with a sheer delight in rhythmic physical movement. (Jonas 1992, 115–16)

This last statement merits some attention. Jonas's text accompanies the popular PBS series, *Dancing*, and as such, this volume was a widely distributed work and read by many students; therefore, the misinformation contained becomes problematic for the understanding of solo improvised dance as a form of cultural expression, and what constitutes "masculine" behavior. Jonas assumed that the dancing seen on the video was a female dance form with "no masculine equivalent." In addition, a caption accompanying a photograph of a man dancing in Egypt states: "Perhaps because dancing in Arab countries tends to be segregated by gender, there is an undercurrent of male dancing that parodies the social dancing of women. The male dancers (below) impersonating women in Luxor, Egypt" (1992, 113). In fact, the photograph shows a man sporting a moustache dancing in male clothes. Clearly Jonas watched the video in the section on Morocco and listened to the comments made by upper-class Moroccan commentators, and he believed what the commentators had to say. In the dialogue, Mohammad Chtatou, a sociologist, claims that dance is "womanly, not manly"; that it is essentially a female activity, only marginally performed by men (*Dancing*, Video 3). Jonas should have at least been suspicious that Chtatou's statements were misleading because the footage accompanying his questionable observations, heard in a voiceover, showed a large group of men dancing with great enjoyment, the very dancing he described in the quotation above. They neither imitate nor parody women. They only dance (see Shay 2002, 126–62). As Berger states:

The latest evidence of official and elitist embarrassment over belly dance is the government's encouragement and the public's enthusiastic reception of a troupe of Cairo students (the Reda Troupe) who combine certain cautious gestures in the direction of the traditional Oriental dance with a greater emphasis on modern techniques drawing upon folk material. I do not mean to belittle them when I say that part of their popularity stems from the fact that they provide a native Egyptian dance form that need not be identified with the disreputable (though appreciated) *danse du ventre*. (1961, 7)

Even such a trained anthropologist as Dupree comments about Afghan male dancers: "The absence of women performers long ago led to female impersonation" (1976, 15). Thus, he follows the western tradition of assuming that the dancers were female impersonators, but close inspection of the performance of the dancer in Dupree's own film,

with his short hair, is not impersonating a woman but is clearly marked by his admiring audience as male. His clothing, consisting of both male and female garments, is intended to mark him as a professional dancer.

How Did Male Dancers Present Themselves?

I combine the discussion of how male dancers presented themselves with what they wore since these two issues are inextricably woven together. These are important issues, for they directly challenge the misconception that male dancers were performing a parody of, or imitating women. Referring to handsome young men who were the objects of erotic desire, including dancers, Najmabadi notes: "There is no reason to assume that these men want to appear female" (2005, 16). They did not imitate or parody women, except as part of the occasional play-acting, because they attracted large male audiences and patrons precisely because they were popular as male performers. They did often adopt a flamboyant combination of male and female attire, but there were generally elements such as the cap and the hair, even when worn long, or other subtle sartorial elements that marked the male dancer as male.

The traditional Iranian theater, which, like the *Commedia del'arte*, features stereotyped roles such as the clown, the venal old man, and the daughter (played by a male) whom he is trying to marry to a rich old man. The latter role is known as *zan-push* (literally "dressed as a woman"). Western readers should not confuse this role with female impersonation as seen in western nightclubs. There is no attempt at verisimilitude. The actor is clearly male, and the wearing of items of women's clothing is designed for comedic effect and his female role-playing, like the boys in Shakespeare's plays, follows Islamic proscriptions against men and women appearing in public together.¹¹

European observers came to the Middle East bearing orientalist opinions concerning depraved Muslim morals and looked to have them validated. A closer analysis reveals that male dancers were almost always discernable from females in iconographic sources. They did not specifically wear female garb, unless playing a female role, but rather special clothing and costumes suitable to show off their movements and to make them unique and attractive as dancers and entertainers, not unlike Elton John or Sting. The clothing of these dancers is frequently described as effeminate, only occasionally as specifically female. Utilizing elements of both male and female clothing, they above all wished to appear attractive to their male audiences and patrons, as males. The reader should also not confuse drag queens and female impersonators in the West, who are attempting to pass themselves off or give the illusion that they are women, with male dancers in the Middle East. "As [Cassandra] Lorus argues in her paper, 'Desire and the Gaze: Spectacular Bodies in Cairene Elite Weddings' (1996), while a bride's clothed body is the designated repository of sexuality during a wedding, so too, is a dancer's body such a location while she is performing an eastern dance at a wedding" (quoted in Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, 21). The male dancer, too, was a "designated repository of sexuality" and therefore the clothing, often described in detail by observers, was as exotic, flamboyant, rich, and

attractive as the dancers and their handlers could afford. We know only of the costumes they wore for their performances; we know nothing of their daily clothing.

Who Were Their Audiences?

All of the sources describe the popularity of the performances of male dancers. In some areas, such as Central Asia, and at historical periods, as when the female dancers were driven from Cairo to Esneh, some five hundred miles away, male dancers were the only entertainers, but that was the exception. Generally groups of both male and female dancers were available and the audiences who attended the performances of male performers did so because they wanted to see the entertainment that these male performers provided. Mashhun notes that “the entertainers in the gatherings of the shah were sometimes men and sometimes women, and sometimes both” (2001, 291). In Central Asia, including Afghanistan, powerful, conservative clerics prevented any professional class of female dancers from developing throughout the period under discussion.

Virtually all of the European travelers’ accounts wonderingly describe the popularity of male dancers among their male audiences:

These *batchas*, or dancing boys, are a recognized institution throughout the whole of the settled portions of Central Asia, though they are most in vogue in Bukhara, and the neighboring Samarkand. *Batchas* are as much respected as the greatest singers and artistes are with us. Every movement they make is followed and applauded, and I have never seen such breathless interest as they excite, for the whole crowd seems to devour them with their eyes, while their hands beat time to every step. . . . It is as much the custom for a Bokhariot gentleman to keep one as it was in the Middle Ages for each knight to have his squire. In fact no establishment of a man of rank or position would be complete without one, and men of small means club together to keep one among them, to amuse them in their hours of rest and recreation. (Schuyler 1876 [1966], 70–71)

Performances were often held in the royal palaces and homes of the rich in cities like Tehran, Cairo, Bukhara, and Istanbul. Middle class audiences might see performances at coffee houses, which were abundant in these cities, and other public sites. Everyone attempted to hire professional entertainers for weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and other special occasions. Since the troupes of dancers were able to charge according to their skills, quality, and reputation, the top groups successfully plied their trade in the palaces and aristocratic manors, while those who could afford to pay less hired those lower on the scale. Women would generally have observed male dancers only if they were visible from the women’s quarters.

Metin And notes that the dancing boys were so popular that their appearances threatened the public order, and in Istanbul the situation could get out of hand:

In the taverns the people became so intense in their appreciation of the dances that, not infrequently, they were carried away into an ecstasy of obscene and blasphemous

mous words, yells and shouts, glass breaking, sword and dagger brandishing, and even quarrels among themselves. The popularity of the dancing boys led to so much trouble and quarrelling among the Janissaries that, finally, to preserve order in his army, Sultan Mahmud forbade their appearance. (1959, 30–31)

What Were the Attitudes toward Male Dancers?

There is no clear answer to this question and what I have presented indicates a range of attitudes and not a little ambiguity regarding professional male performers. Princess Taj Al-Saltana's observation, that "Abdi was unworthy of anyone's love because he was a dancer," sums up the common perception that professional dancers were passive homosexuals, or were available to play a passive sexual role, and therefore dishonorable. Dupree noted in Afghanistan in the 1970s that "some dancing boys supplement their income serving as male prostitutes. Sometimes they form a partnership with a lover such as a lorry driver, and travel together from town to town" (1976, 16).

Religious figures often fulminated against dance and dancers. Schimmel comments: "Treatises and articles against dancing have been written throughout the centuries, for one saw here demonic influences; hence musicians and dancers should not serve as witnesses at court" (1994, 415). Their association with the medieval underworld and the need to keep them "under the supervision of the police," has already been noted.

On the other hand, numerous observers have commented on the enormous popularity and fame that at least the most skilled and famous of them enjoyed. English diplomat Henry Lansdell observed a dance performance in an Uzbek provincial town in the 1880s that took place in front of a large crowd who had gathered to see a performance of dancing boys. He commented,

Their appreciation of the *batchas* was intense. They offered them tea and fruit, and, when the boys sat, they could hardly have been made more of had they been the first stars of a London season. They seated themselves apart from "the vulgar crowd," near to us, whereupon lights were placed before them, that all might gaze and admire. (1887 [1978], 304).

Schuyler's observation that patrons reached out to help establish these dancers in business after their professional life had ceased indicates that the attitudes toward them continued to be affectionate. "Even when a batcha passes through the bazaar all who know him rise to salute him with hands upon their hearts, and the exclamation *lf 'kullak!* (your slave) and should he deign to stop and rest in any shop, it is thought a great honor" (1876 [1966], 70–71). Clearly attitudes toward male dancers are ambiguous, with disdain and admiration, dishonor and fascination, all in tension.

Most of these male dancers did not enter their profession because they were exclusively homosexual in inclination or "just loved to dance." Western individuals, who have the freedom to enter chosen professions and vocations, as well as lifestyles, should not confuse the lives and practices of the historical professional dancer with their own experi-

ences. For most male and female dancers this was hard, gritty work. If they became stars, it was through long hours of rehearsal and a winning personality. Only a few rose above the stigma of their dishonorable profession. Unlike the nineteenth-century ballerina, the traditional professional dancer in the Middle East has never been able to overcome the strong choreophobic attitudes in this region to transcend their unsavory profession to become regarded as artists as are ballet dancers in contemporary Western society.

The Contemporary Male Oriental Dancer in the Middle East

World War II marks a sea change in the manner in which traditional and folk dances are conceived and performed both in the West, and later in the Middle East and Central Asia. Forces of modernity, nationalism, and postcolonialism converged so that national elites in newly emancipated Middle Eastern nations like Egypt and Turkey began to cast about for ways to fashion unique, nationally specific identities. Folklore, including dance with its colorful national costumes, became an obvious tool for the manipulation of national symbols to construct a bright, new national heritage, one that befitted Egypt's and Turkey's status as independent, modern and forward-looking nations. Hundreds of young urban men and women flocked to join colorful, highly choreographed folk dance companies (Shay 2002).

Egyptians lived through the traumatic, often brutal experience of colonialism—Ptolemaic, Roman, Persian, Ottoman, French, and British—for centuries. The British colonial period was not the more simplistic colonialism of past empires: superior power dominating and consuming the other through brute force (although that happened). Rather, as political science scholar Timothy Mitchell penetratingly describes, British colonialists attempted through a variety of methods, particularly through the educational system, the colonial civil service, and the armed forces, to colonize the Egyptian mind and create disciplined bodies: “Disciplinary power, by contrast, works not from the outside but from within, not at the level of an entire society but at the level of detail, and not by restricting individuals and their actions but by producing them. . . . They also produce, within such institutions, the modern individual, constructed as an isolated, disciplined, receptive, and industrious political subject” (1998, xi). Colonized individuals and nations attempt in every way to emulate the very colonizers against whom they have struggled. In this love-hate relationship, sensitive to negative criticism, postcolonial individuals seek to construct a national identity that will be acceptable and esteemed by Europeans and Americans. This included changing attitudes toward sexuality and gender and constructing new identities through the arts: “They want art to represent and reveal them only at their nicest, finest, and most flattering. Images are to be ‘positive.’ The genre of realism is to redeem the ‘negative’ images of the past and to project the aspirations of the community in the present” (Stimpson 1994, 23).

Mahmoud Reda

Mahmoud Reda, the seminal figure in modern Egyptian dance, emerged within the contexts of newly emerging nationalism, postcolonial euphoria, and modernity. From

the 1950s, through creating new movements and stagings, he created a new dance tradition, one in which the inherent sexuality in traditional Egyptian dance became de-emphasized. He employed choreographic strategies that defined the new representation of the male dancer in solo improvised dance. This is a distinct and conscious break with the past. He turned to contemporary Egyptian folk dance, the main form of which is a genre of domestic belly dance, for inspiration. He consciously and specifically attempted to erase the equation of dancer, male or female, with prostitution, by erasing or altering any movements he perceived as overtly sexual. Like many individuals of his time, Reda was not interested in reproducing authentic dance traditions on the stage. They had to be remade and recreated for the approval of the new postcolonial elite. This new dance genre can be characterized as Egyptian character dance, a form of ballet or stylized form of folk dance. It is, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's (1983) terms, an "invented tradition" that has now become naturalized on Egyptian soil. Reda's style of dance has been widely emulated in Egypt, throughout the Arab world, and in the West.

Walter Armbrust in his masterful analysis of Egyptian popular culture notes that "heritage is not simply there, but something to be properly organized. Vulgarities should be struck from the record and the folk be admitted to Egypt's heritage on condition of 'authenticity.' 'Scientific' methods sort out the crass and regrettable from the sources of refinement . . ." (1996, 38). He adds, "Others considered folklore an evil to be stamped out by a benevolently modern state, and encouraged the substitution of almost any cultural model that is not the traditional 'backward' one" (37). Armbrust, while not specifically addressing the oeuvre of Mahmoud Reda, situates Reda's approach to the creation of a new folkloric dance genre within the Egyptian national quest for modernization.

Mahmoud Reda's interest in dance began in his youth in the 1940s. He was a devotee of Hollywood musicals and he became enamored of the dance styles of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. He took formal ballet classes, which were difficult to find during his youth. Paradoxically, taking ballet classes in the Middle East was not regarded as the effeminate and epicene activity it appears to be for many individuals in the West, but rather bore the cachet of a high art from the West, superior to native dance traditions, another legacy of colonialism. After World War II, many male dancers in the Middle East report having taken such training, which in those early days, except in Turkey, was largely in the hands of the Armenian community.

Reda first choreographed a work commissioned by the Egyptian government in 1954 and went to Moscow with the group who performed his work. Although both he and Farida Fahmy (1987, 15–16) vigorously deny it, the influence of the Soviet state dance ensembles clearly had an impact on his choreographic and presentational strategies. In the 1950s dancers from the Moiseyev Dance Company of the former Soviet Union were sent to Egypt to "advise" the *firqat al-qawmiyyah*, the ensemble the Egyptian Government's Ministry of Culture founded a short time after Reda's fledgling company had begun (see Shay 2002).

His dance style parted company with past dance practices because "the reputation of dance was terrible. We decided to avoid strong movements of the belly and hips, and we covered the dancers. The (male) *fellahin* of the Delta had no distinct dance tradition,

so I created one. I did not want to leave the region without a dance so I formed a style from everyday movements” (personal interview, January 10, 2000). Thus, Reda created an “Egyptian heritage” through his new genre of dance. His choreographies and movement styles were, as performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes regarding state-sponsored dance companies like the Reda Troupe:

Such choices in repertoire and style are ideologically charged. Folkloric troupes attempt to find a middle ground between exotic and familiar pleasures and to bring these forms (and their performers) into the European hierarchy of artistic expression, while establishing their performance as national heritage. The more modern the theater where the troupe performs the better, for often there is a dual message: powerful, modern statehood, expressed in the accoutrements of civilization and technology is wedded to a distinctive national identity. (1998, 65)

At the same time that he de-emphasized female sexuality, he totally erased male sexuality as one can see it today in social solo improvised dancing throughout both urban and rural Egypt. Reda, following in the hallowed dance steps of Fred Astaire, in the two films in which he and his company star Fahmy (Reda’s sister-in-law), quickly establishes his identity as a modern, upper-middle-class heterosexual by featuring a female love interest whom he pursues throughout the remainder of the films. Except in scenes in which he is clearly a professional folk dancer, he wears the clothing of an upper-middle-class Western urban man, strongly reminiscent of those worn by Gene Kelly in films of the period.

As I detailed above, traditional professional male dancers carried out their trade in the most peripheral regions of the Middle East until the present, but in cities that had a major European colonial presence, like Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus, they largely disappeared from the urban scene. According to recent newspaper stories, they are beginning to reappear in cabarets, but not in traditional guise (Morris 2000; *New York Times* 2000). This is no return to the golden days of boy dancers. Like their female counterparts they learn their movements by “watching old Egyptian movies,” a standard teach-yourself method among belly dancers, and their costumes derive from Hollywood sex-and-sand films rather than any attempt at historical reconstruction.

Because of changed attitudes toward male dancers, these new dancers constitute an anomaly in the eyes of the majority of their co-nationals, and they have created a position of ambiguity, unlike the dancing boys of previous generations who had formed a societal institution. Also unlike those boy dancers, these men made a choice of profession and entered it knowing that they would incur potentially negative and derisive reactions (see Morris 2000; *New York Times* 2000).

Male Oriental Dancers in the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the United States

It is difficult to characterize the many Middle Eastern diaspora communities in the United States without falling into the trap of essentializing and thus creating a skewed portrait of these communities. Even within those transplanted communities a range of behaviors and attitudes toward dance and dancers exists, between generations and

between those who are long-time residents and those who have newly arrived, among others. As an example of some of those attitudes and behaviors, I will pull from personal experiences and interviews from Southern California, which is home to several very large communities of individuals from the Middle East. These communities do not exactly mirror the Middle East, however, since the levels of education of a significant percentage of those communities are much higher than in the home countries as are the ratios of urban to rural inhabitants. Relatively few Turks reside in Los Angeles, compared to Arabs and Persians, brought to, or driven to, California by the twin engines of politics and economics. In addition, the number of minority groups—Kurds, Armenians, Jews, Copts, Zoroastrians, Druze, Assyrians, and others—reside in Southern California in far greater ratios relative to the majority populations of their homelands. That having been said, in many ways, because of nostalgia and homesickness, many individuals attempt to keep certain traditions (for example the formalities of weddings) more here than they did when they were home. “There people sought the modern; here they seek the traditional” (Jamal personal interview, March 14, 2001). Thus, as in the homeland, dance becomes an icon of the expression of traditional joy, and the services of professional dancers become an indispensable element in celebratory events.

Several small dance troupes, four all female and two with both males and females, as well as male and female solo dancers, serve these communities, which number in the hundreds of thousands (Yayoi Taketani, personal interview, March 12, 2001). Male Middle Eastern dancers whose cultural heritage is Middle Eastern can be found in two different contexts, rarely moving between the two. First, there are several male dancers who work almost exclusively within their own communities, where they are more secure, both culturally and linguistically.¹² Second, there are individuals, like Yousary Sharif, who make their careers based on teaching American students and function extensively in the American belly dance community as instructors. It should also be noted that two or three older male dancers, now in their sixties and seventies, follow the pre-World War I custom of bearing the label of entertainer rather than dancer because they sing, dance, act, and perform comedy routines. They operate as soloists, occasionally teaming up with other entertainers for special theatrical projects. They are widely perceived in the Iranian community as passive homosexuals, and they openly make comic innuendoes about this topic.

Those few younger male dancers, now in their forties and fifties, who work within the diaspora communities often lead dance companies of mostly non-Iranian or non-Arab women. Unlike the older entertainers, these men are exclusively dancers. In the Iranian community they perform at weddings, nightclubs, and as back-up dancers for Persian-language popular music singers making television appearances and music videos. (For a discussion of the Iranian popular music industry in the United States, see Naficy 1993 and Shay 2000.)¹³ They must engage non-native women because performing dance in public, particularly performing for weddings and private parties, carries such a low status that it severely endangers a woman’s reputation and her family fears for her chances of contracting a suitable marriage (Shay 1999).

Yayoi Taketani, an oriental dancer, has managed and performed with two such groups

over the past two decades, as well as performing in two professional fine arts companies that perform Middle Eastern repertoires, during the period in which the Iranian and Arab communities both mushroomed in size and complexity. She describes her experiences:

Among the various Arab groups, the Palestinians, the Egyptians, the Lebanese, and the Iraqis, there is a great demand for “*zaafa*,” the traditional wedding procession, with traditional instruments and songs, which are different for, say, the Egyptians and the Palestinians. They want both men and women to do folkloric dances and to cover themselves. A few of the more open-minded Lebanese and Egyptians still like to have the belly dancers in cut-down costumes, but conservative Muslims, and even Christians, want the dancers covered. For the Arab communities, we are most in demand for folkloric dances.

One of our male dancers, an Arab from Lebanon, tried for years to be accepted as a male belly dancer, and he wore “flash and trash” costumes with lots of beads, fringe, and glitter. But the Arabs do not want to see a male do professional belly dancing, even though the male guests do it socially. One night at an Egyptian wedding he performed the dance with the candelabra and the people were outraged. There is no problem, however, for a man to dress in folkloric costumes and dance folkloric dances. (Taketani, personal interview)

Beyond the danger of conflating and essentializing between specific Arab nationalities, the large Iranian community also exhibits differences among the religious and linguistic groups as well as within them. They react to male and female belly dancers differently than the Arab groups. Egyptian style cabaret dancing is almost as exotic to Iranians as it is to westerners and their experience of it generally derives from Egyptian films and cabarets, both banned in Iran since the 1979 revolution. “The Iranians love belly dancing and they allow the Arab man I mentioned, as well as a well-known Iranian male dancer to perform, although sometimes they request all-female groups. The Muslims will not hire the Iranian dancer, only the Jews will have him” (Taketani, personal interview). Jamal added that “these male dancers are regarded as amusing and the people love to laugh at them and to feel superior to them. They are definitely not respected” (personal interview, March 12, 2001).

Among the Iranian community here, when the name of that well-known dancer, I will call him Ali, is mentioned, they make grimaces, sneers, raise their eyebrows, and in every way, indicate that “we all know” that he is homosexual, but in conforming to Stephen O. Murray’s penetrating analysis of “keeping silent” (1997), no one pronounces the “h” word.¹⁴ A second male dancer, who is also well known and who is heterosexual, manages a professional career in dance, but because of his sexuality and his primary association with modern rather than traditional dance, he has largely escaped the negative associations that plague Ali and the older performers I mentioned earlier.

As a dark coda to this study, one of the male dancers I profiled in this essay recently returned to Iran and was arrested, tried, and found guilty of “corrupting youth” through teaching dance classes in the United States. Confirming the concept of “choreophobia,” which I introduced in an earlier study (Shay 1999), the Iranian court relied heavily on the

evidence of videocassettes and satellite television broadcasts that depicted him performing “Arabic” belly dance. His arrest and trial generated many newspaper reports throughout the United States (see, for example, *Arizona Daily Sun*, July 9, 2002; Bahrapour July 18, 2002; Slackman July 9, 2002).¹³

Thus, although the male dancer continues as an institution, it is an occupation that is fading with the emergence of new concepts of gender and sexuality and the issue of which behaviors may be ascribed as “male” and “female” constitute dynamic and fluid cultural categories. Nevertheless, solo improvised dance in Middle Eastern contexts is still performed by males as a social activity, and in that form dancing is a unisex activity. The performances of dancing males can still excite both intense interest and deep-seated feelings of choreophobia.

Notes

1. A Qajar Princess (1884–1936), Taj Al-Sultana’s memoirs made her one of the few Iranian women whose voice was heard before the Second World War. In his notes to Taj Al-Sultana’s memoirs, historian Abbas Amanat notes that Taj Al-Sultaneh’s husband “pawned off pieces of their fortune, perhaps to spend lavishly on his new lover, a male dancer called Tayhu” (1993, 54).

2. I challenge statements like the following because of the abundant iconographic and written evidence of European travelers. In fact, women were often not permitted to dance in public. In a recent article, Iranian dance scholar Azardokht Ameri stated: “It is important to remember that historical research shows that dance movements were based on female dance, because historically the most important performers of dance were women” (2003, 61). A European man who had lived in Cairo asked me why all of the men, most of them heterosexual as far as he knew, danced a “woman’s dance” (personal interview, January 19, 2000).

3. In a 2002 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mara Reynolds indicates homosexual liaisons continue in Afghanistan. It is reported from a western point of view, with no indication of the quasi-institutional aspects of the system.

4. Bagoas was the “Persian boy” of Mary Renault’s outstanding historical novel of the same name. In her historical explanations at the end of the novel, she discusses in detail the citations from Ancient Greek literature that mention Bagoas (1972, 413–19, Author’s notes).

5. One reader suggested that this paradoxical category of male dancer shares certain parallels with nineteenth-century ballet dancers. Clearly, adopting a feminized role in homosexual acts raises Foucauldian issues of power and domination within sexuality that lie beyond the scope of this essay.

6. While linguistic terms for passive homosexuals may be avoided, code words abound such as *gheirti* (effeminately flirtatious), *mamush* (sissy), *Malijak* (the name of a kept boy of Naser-ad-Din Shah that came to mean any kept favorite among members of the court). In both historical and in contemporary contexts, passive homosexual acts committed in one’s youth are a passing event, but in older individuals it is considered pathological, when the dreaded term “obne’i” (Persian), “*ibne*” (Turkish) or “*’ubna*” and “*bigha*” (Arabic) may be used (Rowson 1991; Murray 1997, 14–43; Necef 1992, 73–75, Jamal September 9, 2004 personal interview). For a nearly complete list of terms for homosexual behavior in Arabic and Persian see Shamisa 2002, 13–14.

7. I am not entirely comfortable with the term “Islamic,” which refers to a religion. No one refers to Jewish or Christian homosexuality, a better title for their work would have been *Homosexualities in Islamic or Muslim Societies*.

8. The term *adab* characterizes literature written for the *adib*, the educated man in the classical period, which for purposes of this essay I am extending from the beginning of the Abbassid caliphate from 750 CE to 1500, the end of the Timurid dynasty.

9. The idea of a dancer becoming a major official such as the Grand Vazir should give the reader pause. I suspect that some of the informants were pulling Mr. Schuyler's gullible leg. Schuyler's description certainly suggests that real affection accompanied the sexual liaisons between the dancers and their patrons who stood ready to help them after their dancing careers had ended.

10. Khaleqi speaks exclusively of female dancers. He is reluctant to discuss the whole issue of professional dancers because of their lurid reputations, but prides himself on his bravery and frankness in mentioning them (1974, 469). Given his attitude toward discussing women entertainers, the idea of discussing male dancers must have proven truly impossible, and although there are some photographs of them in the text, he remains silent on the topic.

11. Roger Baker, in his study of female impersonation in the performing arts, discerns two major modes of female impersonation. The first he terms "real disguise" applies when the actor playing a woman is taken by the audience . . . as a real woman. He cites Shakespearean boy actors. The second mode is the "false disguise," which "happens when there is no attempt by the performer to pretend he is anything other than a man playing a woman" (1994, 14-15). I argue that male dancers, unless they were acting the part of a female, do not fall into either category.

12. Because of the large numbers of Iranians living in Southern California, a predominately closed world exists in which many individuals, particularly in the media, service, and entertainment fields, negotiate their lives with relatively little reference to their new American environment. Many individuals possess only a rudimentary command of English, and they carry out their lives much as they did in Tehran. It is perfectly feasible to carry out one's life in the Los Angeles Iranian community without speaking or knowing English.

13. The Arab community does not have a corresponding popular music industry. The Arab music world is centered largely in Cairo and Beirut.

14. The term "gay" would be an inappropriate since its use is for self-identified individuals who wear that identity with a sense of pride or at least with no shame.

15. This dancer, Mohammad Khordadian, was released by paying a huge fine and promising not to dance in public. He currently dances professionally in Dubai, which has a large Iranian diaspora.

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